

November 1998

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Wilhite, Jeffrey M. (1998) "International Dateline - How Many Countries Are There in the World?," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 10: Iss. 5, Article 39.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.3018>

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International Dateline — How Many Countries Are There in the World?

by **Jeffrey M. Wilhite** (Asst. Prof. of Bibliography and Government Documents, Reference Librarian, U. of Oklahoma) <Jeffrey M. Wilhite@styx.services.ou.edu>



Opening

"How many countries are there in the world?" This is a question much more easily asked than answered. On first thought, it would be assumed a reliable reference source would be able to answer the question immediately and directly. This is not true. The question must first be broken down into its three most possible variations. Then comparison of organizational country lists and private source guides is necessary. After consulting the **United Nations Member States** list, the **United States Department of State Independent States in the World** list, *The World of Learning*, and *The Statesman's Year-Book* one can find an accurate answer to this seemingly simple question and its variations.

Defining the Question

The question must first be defined to determine what information is being requested. The first step in this process is to define a country and differentiate it from a principality. The term country is often used synonymously with nation or independent state although these definitions will sometimes differ slightly. A country is defined in a number of ways: for example, as a tract of land or region, lacking precisely defined boundaries, viewed geographically or aesthetically; as the territory of a nation; as the native land of an individual person; and as a rural area as opposed to an urban area.¹ A nation is defined as the largest society of people united by common culture and consciousness, generally linked by common descent, historical, ethnic, and possibly linguistic ties, having common interests of place and land, usually recognized as a separate, political entity.² An independent state, according to the United States of America Department of State, refers to a people politically organized into a sovereign state with a definite territory recognized as independent by the USA.³ Whereas the terms country, nation, and independent state can be used interchangeably, the term principality cannot. A principality, also known as a dependent area, encompasses a broad category of political entities that fall in some way within the jurisdiction of a nation.⁴ Although principalities sometimes appear to fall under the definition of a country, they are not. Some prime examples of principalities, with controlling nations in parentheses, are: Guam (USA), Hong Kong (China), Scotland (U.K.), Northern Ireland (U.K.) and Greenland (Denmark).

The second step in defining the question of how many countries there are in the world involves deciding what information the ques-

tioner is actually desiring. The important difference to note is whether the questioner is wanting the exact number of defined countries in the world, the number of defined countries and major principalities, or the number of defined countries and all of the principalities in the world. Each of these questions asks a different question and has a specifically different answer. The goal of this article will be to answer all three questions.

Factors

Once the concepts of a country/nation/independent state and principality are defined, the next step is to review the factors which stand in the way of finding a concise and contemporary list of all the current countries and principalities of the world. The two main factors to be considered in this arena are new countries/principalities and countries/principalities with recently-changed names. Newly recognized countries/principalities are not limited to only those areas which have recently been created but also to areas which have recently been officially recognized by the USA or the United Nations (UN). Some of the most currently recognized countries are: Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992), Croatia (1992), Slovenia (1992), and Palau (1994). The second factor to consider is countries/principalities which have recently changed their names because of wars, unions, or for political means. Prime examples of this include: Burma changing to Myanmar (1989) and Zaire changing to The Democratic Republic of the Congo (1997). These two factors must be taken into consideration before a compilation of all of the countries and principalities of the world is attempted.

Sources

The most important point to remember in checking sources for this question is how current are the resources. The sources must be current to keep up with the changing number of countries and principalities in the world. For the following article, the sources used were: the **United Nations Member States** list, January, 1998,⁵ the **United States Department of State Independent States in the World** list, March, 1998,⁶ 1998 *World of Learning*,⁷ and 1997-1998 *Statesman's Year-Book*.⁸

The four sources fall into two categories: organizational lists and private source lists. The USA, as one of the largest political powers in the world, and the UN, as the largest political organization in the world, publish lists of the countries that they recognize in an official capacity. The lists are not identical,

as the agendas of the two organizations are different. The list published by the USA is specific to the USA's political vision, just as the UN's list is. The private resources list as many countries and principalities as they can locate. *World of Learning* and *Statesman's Year-Book* are both exemplary sources of international information. *World of Learning* began in 1948 and centers on education in the world. In the process of presenting educational directory information, *World of Learning* also paints a complete picture of the world, its countries, and its principalities. *Statesman's Year-Book* began in 1864 and is one of the most long-standing resources for political and international research.

The value of the organizational lists is to show the political stance of the USA and the UN in the realm of the world. I believe the value of the private source lists is to balance the two politically motivated lists. The two organizational lists will answer the question of how many exact countries there are in the world, but only a review of the two organizational lists and the two private source lists will generate a partial to full list of exact countries and principalities.

The total number of listed possibilities from all four sources is 235 countries/ principalities.

The United States Department of State Independent States in the World list

The list of USA's Independent States in the World lists 190 countries. The USA does not recognize any principalities except through the controlling country. The USA list also has a number of interesting facts: Burma is still recognized by the name of Burma and not the new name of Myanmar; Vatican City is recognized and referred to as the Holy See; The Republic of Congo and the Democratic Republic of the Congo are both referred to as Congo; and because of diplomatic relations with China, Taiwan is not considered a country but as a part of China.

The United Nations Member States list

The United Nations Member States list cites 185 countries. The UN also does not recognize any principalities, only the controlling country. The UN list, with five less than the USA list, is missing the following non-UN members: Kiribati, Switzerland, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vatican City. Other differences between these two lists include the UN's recognition of Burma as Myanmar and their identification of The Republic of Congo and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Other

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facets include spelling variations (Vietnam as Viet Nam) to countries listed differently, including: Macedonia as The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia; North Korea as The Democratic People's Republic of Korea; South Korea as The Republic of Korea; and Syria as Syrian Arab Republic.

World of Learning

The 1998 *World of Learning* lists 197 entries. The *World of Learning* lists countries as well as most of the principalities. Besides listing 176 of the 190 USA listed countries, the *World of Learning* also lists 21 additional principalities, including Aruba, Nauru, Reunion, and Taiwan. Variations in the *World of Learning* list tend to follow the UN list. There are some additional variances, including China listed as The People's Republic of China and Hong Kong and Taiwan listed under China. Spelling variations may also differ, with Macao represented on the World of Learning list as Macau.

Statesman's Year-Book

The 1997-1998 *Statesman's Year-Book* lists 233 entries. The *Statesman's Year-Book* lists all of the major countries and almost all of the principalities in the world. Out of the 235 possibilities, the only entries not included in the *Statesman's Year-Book* are: Aland Island, Israeli-Occupied Territory and Emerging Palestine Autonomous Areas, Myanmar (Burma is still listed) and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Zaire is still listed). This index does contain more country and principality references than any of the other three sources. Only a few of the *Statesman's Year-Book* listings are given here, including some rather esoteric principalities: Anguilla, The Falkland Islands, Pitcairn Island, and Vojvodina. Name variations also continue: Gambia is referred to as The Gambia, Bosnia and Herzegovina are referred to as Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Vatican City as Vatican City State.

Final Decisions

The final decision as to how many countries there are in the world, per the four sources, is answered differently for each of the three variations of the question asked.

1. How many countries are there in the world?

*criteria: include the country if it appears in the USA and/or the UN list.

2. How many countries and major principalities are there in the world?

*criteria: include the country if it appears in the USA and/or the UN list — *criteria: include the principalities that appear in both *World of Learning* and *The Statesman's Year-Book*.

3. How many country and total principalities are there in the world?

*criteria: include the country if it appears in the USA and/or the UN list — *criteria: include the principalities that appear in either *World of Learning* or *The Statesman's Year-Book*.

According to the country criteria, there are 184 countries recognized by both the USA and the UN. The two countries with recently changed

names (Burma changed to Myanmar and Zaire changed to the Democratic Republic of the Congo), negate two country options. There are six other countries acknowledged by either the USA or UN:

Only Recognized by USA: Kiribati, Switzerland, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vatican City

Only Recognized by UN: Myanmar (US still recognized Burma by the name Burma)

This put the final tally at 190 country entries. This answers the original question, without including the principalities.

There are a total of 45 principalities. According to the principality criteria, 19 of these appear in both publications: Aruba, Bermuda, Faroe Islands, French Guiana, French Polynesia, Gibraltar, Greenland, Guadeloupe, Guam, Hong Kong, Macao, Martinique, Nauru, Netherlands Antilles, New Caledonia, Puerto Rico, Reunion, Taiwan, Virgin Islands. Twenty-six principalities appear in only one of the private source lists: Aland Islands, Anguilla, Antarctic Territories, British Antarctic Territory, British Indian Ocean Territory, British Virgin Islands, Channel Islands, Falkland Islands, Isle of Man, Israeli-Occupied Territory and Emerging Palestine Autonomous Areas, Kosovo & Metohija, Mayotte, Montenegro, Montserrat, Niue, Northern Mariana Islands, Pitcairn Island, Saint Helena, Saint Pierre & Miquelon, Samoa (American),

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Endnotes

¹ Audrey N. Clark, *Longman Dictionary of Geography: Human and Physical* (Geographical Publications Limited: London), 1985, p.144.

² John Small and Michael Witherick, *A Modern Dictionary of Geography*, Third Edition (Arnold: London), 1995. p. 164.

³ United States, Department of State, Independent States in the World, March 17, 1998. http://www.state.gov/www/regions/independent_states.html

⁴ *Countries of the World and their Leaders Yearbook, 1991* (Gale: New York), 1991. p. 120.

⁵ United Nations, *United Nations Member States*, January 8, 1998.

<http://www.un.org/Overview/unmember.html>

⁶ United States, Department of State, Independent States of the World, March 17, 1998. http://www.state.gov/www/regions/independent_states.html

⁷ Europa Publications, *The World of Learning 1998* (Europa Publications Limited: London), 1997.

⁸ Brian Hunter, ed., *The Statesman's Year-Book: A Statistical, Political and Economic Account of the States of the World for the Year 1997-1998* (Macmillan: London), 1997.

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collective index processing, registry numbers are updated or corrected. In short, the CI offers access to the same full range of information that can be found in the ten six-month indexes, with updates and corrections (See CHMINF-1@listserv.indiana.edu/ChemAbstractsIndices. June 29, 1993).

For the reasons given above the University of Akron has chosen to withdraw the indexes once the complete set of the Collective Index has arrived. In fact, if responses from the **Chemical Information Discussion List** are any indication, most libraries withdraw them. However, caution must be taken when removing the items to be sure that the full set has arrived. Some libraries have mistakenly withdrawn the semi-annual pieces before the entire set arrives, leaving them short-handed.

After several attempts to find an alternative "home" for the semi-annual indexes, we now routinely discard them in the trash. Unfortunately, since we bind all volume indexes, except for the fifth year pieces, recycling them is not an option. As an alternative to discarding them, libraries may want to consider donating them to libraries in third world countries. The **American Chemical Society** has a service entitled **Project Bookshare** which is charged with collecting chemistry textbooks and journals from donors and making these materials available to libraries in selected small U.S. colleges and to university libraries in developing countries. They will accept volumes of CA, but all donations must be approved before shipment. Also, the donor must assume shipping charges. (For information about **Project Bookshare**, see <http://www.acs.org/memgen/intlactv/prhome.htm>).

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b. Paid and/or Requested Circulation		0	
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Serbia, South Georgia & the South Sandwich Islands, Turks & Caicos Islands, Vojvodina, Wallis & Futuna, and Western Sahara. This puts the final tally at 209 for countries and major principalities, and 235 for countries and all principalities.

The Answers to all the Questions

After all of the searching, the answers

to the three variations of the question, "How many countries are there in the world?" can be answered in one of three ways:

1. How many countries are there in the world? 190
2. How many countries and major principalities are there in the world? 209
3. How many country and total principalities are there in the world? 235

So, that answers the original question and its three possible variations. 

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